

# HOKUSAI

Great Art, Small Sizes: Early Works



RONIN GALLERY







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Great Art, Small Sizes: Early Works

## RONIN GALLERY

425 Madison Ave. New York, NY 10017

The Largest Collection of Japanese Prints in the U.S.  
Japanese and East Asian Contemporary Art

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November 2015

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# Of Magic and Madness

## Hokusai (1760-1849)

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Hokusai is not only among Japan's greatest ukiyo-e artists, but also an inimitable master in the history of art worldwide. From lavish *surimono* and sublime genre prints to steamy *shunga* and tiny travel prints, the exhibition *Hokusai: Great Art, Small Sizes* invites you explore Hokusai's early genius. Before the Great Wave crested white and Red Fuji broke the horizon, petite masterpieces whispered their intricate detail with an enchanting intimacy. With unfaltering creativity, Hokusai presents Edo-period Japan with careful sensitivity to its people and landscape alike. Produced in very small editions and graced with precious details, these prints are exceedingly rare. Some of the works in this catalogue represent the only known copy. Ronin Gallery is pleased to present a collection of these early works, dating between 1790 and 1822.

One would be hard pressed to come across a life that rivals Hokusai's in sheer confusion and turmoil. A succession of misfortunes marks the long course of his life: constant bankruptcy, two ill-fated marriages, and children who were a source of embarrassment to him. At 68, he suffered a debilitating illness; in 1836, he was forced into exile by the dishonorable behavior of his grandson. Three years later, a fire ravaged his residence, destroying countless sketches and drawings. Such catastrophes rendered Hokusai's life a dizzying track of summits and valleys, fame and neglect; with staggering rapidity, he moved residence a total of 90 times, transformed his style, and exhausted a succession of names and schools. One minute he was frantically turning out erotica, the next he was solemnly at work on a high government project; just as he scaled the heights of celebrity, he was rendered impoverished and unkempt, hawking red peppers and

calendars in the street. Yet, throughout it all, Hokusai's work remained a consistent source of order and meaning in his life: it was his home, his nourishment, his mistress, and in the face of its dazzling powers of seduction, all else paled.

Born in 1760 in Katsushika, a small district outside Edo, Hokusai was adopted by the mirror maker Ise Nakajima. Hokusai was put to work in a bookseller's shop at an early age, surrounded by the illustrations of the ukiyo-e masters. Outgrowing this occupation by his early teens, Hokusai soon apprenticed with a woodblock engraver. Four years later, he was accepted into the renowned studio of Katsukawa Shunsho, Japan's leading designer of kabuki prints. Hokusai's gift for design was so evident that Shunsho gave his pupil the professional name "Shunro" within a year's time. This gesture signaled Hokusai's official entry into the world of ukiyo-e and henceforth permitted him to issue prints under the imprimatur of the Katsukawa school. Such a distinction assured 19-year-old Hokusai a secure foothold in the precarious woodblock print market, but restrained his innate talents. In accordance with the agreement between a studio and its artists, by assuming the Katsukawa name, Hokusai was obliged to follow its style and subject matter to the exclusion of any other.

Though he continued to produce mostly Katsukawa-style prints over the next decade, Hokusai grew impatient. Despite repeated quarrels with Shunsho, Hokusai experimented with various ukiyo-e conventions, as well as the rigorous classicism of the Kano, Rimpa, and Tosa schools. Enchanted by the work of Kiyonaga, Hokusai began to design *bijin-ga*, or pictures of beautiful women, until he was seduced by the work of Kiyonaga's rival, Utamaro.



Over the next few years, Hokusai joined many of his contemporaries in the grace and gentle charm of the genre print. In this euphoric realm, Hokusai's imagination was free to wander among lithe young beauties lounging on elegant verandas or sauntering across fragrant gardens.

By the early 1790s, Hokusai was using the name "Sori." He derived this appellation from Hyakurin Sori, an artist active between 1750 and 1780. Though Hokusai had already changed his name several times by this point in his career, the adoption of "Sori" signaled a decisive turning point in his aesthetic development. During the next three years, he explored a style of representation that left a definitive mark on his own methods of composition. Developed by Ogata Korin (1660-1716) and popularized by Hyakurin, Hillier describes how this manner of painting depends upon "a subtle play of whimsical imagination, especially in bringing into harmony things oddly incompatible in nature; a power of evocative drawing and composition, sufficiently eccentric to appear the result of a divine intoxication in the artist."<sup>1</sup>

As powerful as its initial impact was, Korin's influence did not reveal itself until Hokusai's mature work. This delayed reaction was partly due to the type of prints Hokusai was designing during this time—*surimono*. Commissioned by poetry clubs or wealthy connoisseurs, these deluxe, limited-edition prints commemorate special occasions, such as the New Year or poetry competitions. Printed on the finest handmade papers, these marvels of woodblock printing were lavishly embellished with gold, silver, bronze, mica, embossing and lacquer. The *surimono* format demanded a delicate, exacting methodology incompatible with extravagant nature of Korin. As many *surimono* were imprinted with light verse or clever aphorisms, poets

and novelists took great delight in providing the literary impetus and wording for these designs. Renowned for his unique compositions in the genre, Hokusai became acquainted with the popular writers of the day and soon travelled with the literati circle. Among these urbane savants, Hokusai built upon his already formidable knowledge of Japanese tales, drama, and poetry; a knowledge that would gradually assume encyclopedic dimensions.

Beyond a fascination for legends and heroes, Hokusai himself possessed an inherent sense of drama and a flair for public spectacle. In 1804, wishing to boost the declining sale of his prints, Hokusai thrilled the Edo crowd by blocking off an area of approximately 200 square yards and lining the ground with a huge patchwork of paper sheets. Scampering up and down its entire length, he proceeded to draft the outlines of Daruma, Japan's beloved Buddhist saint. He worked frantically to complete the image before nightfall, splashing ink onto the paper with huge brooms and mops in a seemingly haphazard fashion. By day's end, a portrait had taken shape, so immense that it could only be viewed in its entirety from the rooftops. It was not long before awed whispers tore through Edo telling of the artist who could draw a figure so huge that a horse could pass through its mouth. But even with theatrics such as these, Hokusai's fame had not yet reached its apogee.

Around the same time that he completed this immense Daruma, Hokusai received a singular honor: an invitation from the shogun Ienari to engage in a contest with the great Chinese painter Buncho. The competition required each artist to draft a painting on the spot. To rival Buncho's compositional imminence, records state that Hokusai tore down a paper screen and covered it with enormous swirls of blue ink. Then, throwing caution to the winds,



he grabbed a rooster by its talons, dipped them into a bowl of red paint, and coaxed the startled bird across the panel of paper. With a triumphant flourish, Hokusai announced the title of his composition: *Maple Leaves in Autumn on Blue Tatsuta River*.

With such ingenious displays of his artistic prowess, Hokusai's reputation soared to legendary heights. Following the great Utamaro's death in 1806, the world of ukiyo-e trained its eyes upon the genius from Katsushika. Utamaro's death was a defining event in Hokusai's artistic development for it marked the end of an era in ukiyo-e. The spell of the old masters was broken and the public hungered for novel sensations. Faced with sense of liberation, Hokusai's style took off in several directions at once. One of the first genres to undergo a dramatic metamorphosis was *bijin-ga*: almost overnight, the icy elegance of Kiyonaga's manner dissolved into a sequence of earthy, warm-blooded temptresses whose erotic allure reached smoldering intensity in the torrid entanglements of Hokusai's new *shunga* (erotic prints). He became intensely absorbed in experimentation and reevaluation of subject, style and format. Hokusai returned to the old kabuki subject of Chushingura, a tale of samurai loyalty that he had illustrated in 1798. When he revisited the subject in 1806, he approached the classic story with a bolder, more daring concept. In 1804, he issued the *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*, a series of scenic prints that presaged the striking color and mastery of natural forms so characteristic of his later work. Concurrently, Hokusai initiated a stormy collaboration with Bakin, one of Japan's greatest novelists. Departing from conventional methods of draftsmanship, Hokusai brilliantly integrated text and image, setting the trend for book illustration. His achievements in the marriage of word and image led Hokusai to produce

masterpiece *ehon*, or illustrated books.

This sort of technical bravura explodes in *ehon* such as *Famous Views of the Eastern Capital* (c.1800), *Amusements of the Eastern Capital* (1802), and *Banks of the Sumida River* (1806). Issued within the first decade of the 19th century, most of the works consider the daily life of the Edo's many inhabitants. One cannot escape the impression that an uncontrollable mania for drawing had seized Hokusai. In these *ehon*, he captures each landscape and custom with tangible vitality and unending fascination. Hokusai's bound collections of *shunga* (erotic prints) from this era seethe with a furious energy, an impeccable virtuosity. Shaking the smooth linear conventions of the erotic genre, these works favor a more frenetic exploration of line. Today, Hokusai's illustrated books continue to astound and captivate those who leaf through their pages. These works reveal his capacity for creative power and foretell the great undertakings that lay ahead of him.

During the next three decades, until his death in 1848, Hokusai was truly a man possessed by a frenzy of inspiration. Much of his work during these years remains without parallel. His unerring sense of line and color, inventiveness, mastery of old forms, and ability to combine these qualities in inimitable compositions mark Hokusai as a true luminary in the history of art. From 1820 on, Hokusai relentlessly strove for a pictorial language capable of satisfying the imperatives of design while retaining the essential form of things. He produced *kacho-ga* (flower-and-bird prints), revolutionized the landscape print through his iconic *36 Views of Mt. Fuji* (1830-1832), and designed masterpiece series such as *100 Poems as Told by the Nurse* (1835-1836) and *Snow, Moon and Flowers* (1832-33), to name just a few.

As he neared the end of his life, Hokusai

signed his work, “the old man mad with painting,” a statement that has immortalized him as an archetypal figure, an artist whose quest for technical excellence was inextricable from his pursuit of the secrets of the universe. It was this quest—this inexorable search for a visual language capable of expressing the very essence of natural objects—that fired up the imaginations of European artists. The impact of Hokusai’s genius broke upon them just as the edifice of the Renaissance tradition was beginning to crumble. Tired of

academic norms and the stale orthodoxy of the Salon, European painters had begun to rebel against classical canons and were ripe for change. The aesthetic of the Japanese print, with its own sense perspective, flat areas of solid color, and clear, precise outlines in black, opened the minds and captured the hearts of Western artists. As Whistler remarked, “the story of the beautiful is already complete—hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon—and embroidered, with birds, upon the fan of Hokusai at the foot of Fujiyama.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Hillier, Jack. *Hokusai: Paintings, Drawings and Woodcuts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1955. Print, 15.
  2. Whitford, Frank. *Japanese Prints and Western Painters*. New York: Macmillan, 1977. Print, 24.

## Select Sources

1. Forrer, Matthi. *Hokusai: Prints and Drawings*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag and Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1991. Print.
2. Hillier, Jack. *Hokusai: Paintings, Drawings and Woodcuts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1955. Print.
3. Lane, Richard. *Hokusai, Life and Work*. New York: Dutton, 1989. Print.
5. Lane, Richard. *Images from the Floating World: The Japanese Print*. New York: Putnam, 1978. Print.
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7. Whitford, Frank. *Japanese Prints and Western Painters*. New York: Macmillan, 1977. Print, 24.





### A Secret Love Letter

Surimono for Year of the Sheep  
 Poets: Hatane Takashi and Asakusan  
 Date: 1799  
 Signature: Sori Aratame Hokusai ga  
 Size: 5" x 6.75"  
 Provenance: Hayashi  
 Ref. #: JPr-26635



### Courtesan Holding Blossoming Plum Branch

Surimono

Date: c. 1798

Signature: Gakyōjin Hokusai ga

Size: 5.25" x 7.25"

Ref. #: JPr-26630





### A Young Beauty Carrying a New Year's Tray

Surimono for Year of the Sheep

Poets: Unryutei, Chiyoki Tobinori and Manzai Ogi

Date: 1799

Signature: Sori Aratame Hokusai ga

Size: 5.5" x 7.25"

Provenance: Hayashi

Ref. #: JPr-26633

The poem on this *surimono* reads "The spring wind blows through the willow branches endlessly, deepening the color of the tree with every breeze."





### White Plum Blossoms

Surimono from Year of the Sheep

Poets: Kasentei Takamaru

Date: 1799

Signature: Sori Aratame Hokusai ga

Size: 5.5" x 7"

Ref. #: JP1-26636

The poem on this *surimono* reads "Twenty days white blossoms restlessly bloom. Morning dew elegantly dresses the petals."



# Hotei and Chinese Boys in the New Year

Surimono

Date: c. 1790

Signature: Sori ga

Size: 5" x 6.75"

Provenance: Beres Collection

Ref. #: JPr-37270





# Willow Tree on the Sumida River

Surimono

Date: c. 1798

Signature: Sori Hokusai ga

Size: 5" x 6.75"

Provenance: Hayashi

Ref. #: JP1-26690





### Two Women Playing Board Game

Surimono for Spring of the Year of the Ox

Date: 1805

Signature: Kukushin Hokusai ga

Size: 5.25" x 7.25"

Ref. #: JPr-26693



# Boy Pulling Pine Tree

Surimono

Date: c. 1795

Signature: Sori ga

Size: 5.25" x 7"

Ref. #: JPr-37273





**Beauty with Lantern Admiring Plum Blossoms in Snow**

Surimono

Date: c. 1804

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 7.5" x 4"

Ref. #: JPR5672





## Tobacco Pouch

Surimono

Date: 1806

Signature: Katsushika Hokusai ga

Size: 5.25" x 7.25"

Ref. #: JPR5887



## Tea Break

Surimono

Date: c. 1800

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 4.25" x 5"

Provenance: Le Veel Collection

Ref. #: JPr-26634





### Painting on Inro with Lacquer

Surimono

Date: c. 1795

Signature: Sori ga

Size: 4.75" x 6.75"

Provenance: Beres Collection

Ref. #: JPr-37272





### Collecting Shellfish

Date: c. 1800

Size: 10.25" x 15"

Ref. #: JPR5220

A group of men and women gather to collect seaweed and shells at low tide. While half-naked men stretch and graceful women bend, a boy runs across the beach with a struggling turtle in both hands. In the background, two men struggle over a basket, encouraging the viewer's eye to travel towards the misty hills beyond the water.



### Grasses of the Four Seasons

Date: c. 1798  
Size: 10" x 15.25"  
Ref. #: JPr-37262

According to Richard Lane, Hokusai designed more than 100 untitled long-*surimono* prints over the turn of the century. This print is untrimmed, making it rare.





### Travelers in Sagami Province

Series: The Mist of Sandara

Date: c. 1798

Signature: Hokusai Sori ga

Size: 8.25" x 12"

Ref. #: JPI-26710

This print is from a *kyōka* (comic print) album, privately published by the Kasumi poetry club in 1797. Another impression of this design can be found in the British Museum.





### Autumn Outing

Date: c. 1800

Size: 7.5" x 15"

Ref. #: JPI-26716

This print may be from a *mitate* (parody) series of Act. 8: *The Bridal Journey* from the play *Kanedon Chushingura*.



### Woman Sweeping Away the Hairdresser

Series: One Hundred Comic Poems

Date: c. 1810

Publisher: Kinjudo

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 4.5" x 7"

Ref. #: JPr-26685





## Bamboo Grove

Surimono

Date: c. 1810

Signature: Katsushika Hokusai ga

Size: 7.75" x 6.75"

Provenance: Hayashi

Ref. #: JP5490





### Woman Washing Cloth and Watching Cranes

Surimono

Date: c. 1795

Signature: Sori ga

Size: 7.5" x 7"

Provenance: Hayashi, Beres Collection

Ref. #: JPr-37264



### First Day of Spring

Surimono for the Year of the Monkey

Date: 1788

Signature: Sori ga

Size: 7.5" x 7.25"

Ref. #: JPR5884





### Writing Kit, Brushes, Scissors and Cloth

Series: Uma Zukushi (The Horse Series)

Date: 1822

Signature: Fusenkyo Iitsu hitsu

Size: 8" x 7"

Provenance: Hayashi

Ref. #: JPR1-37124





### Yoshiwara

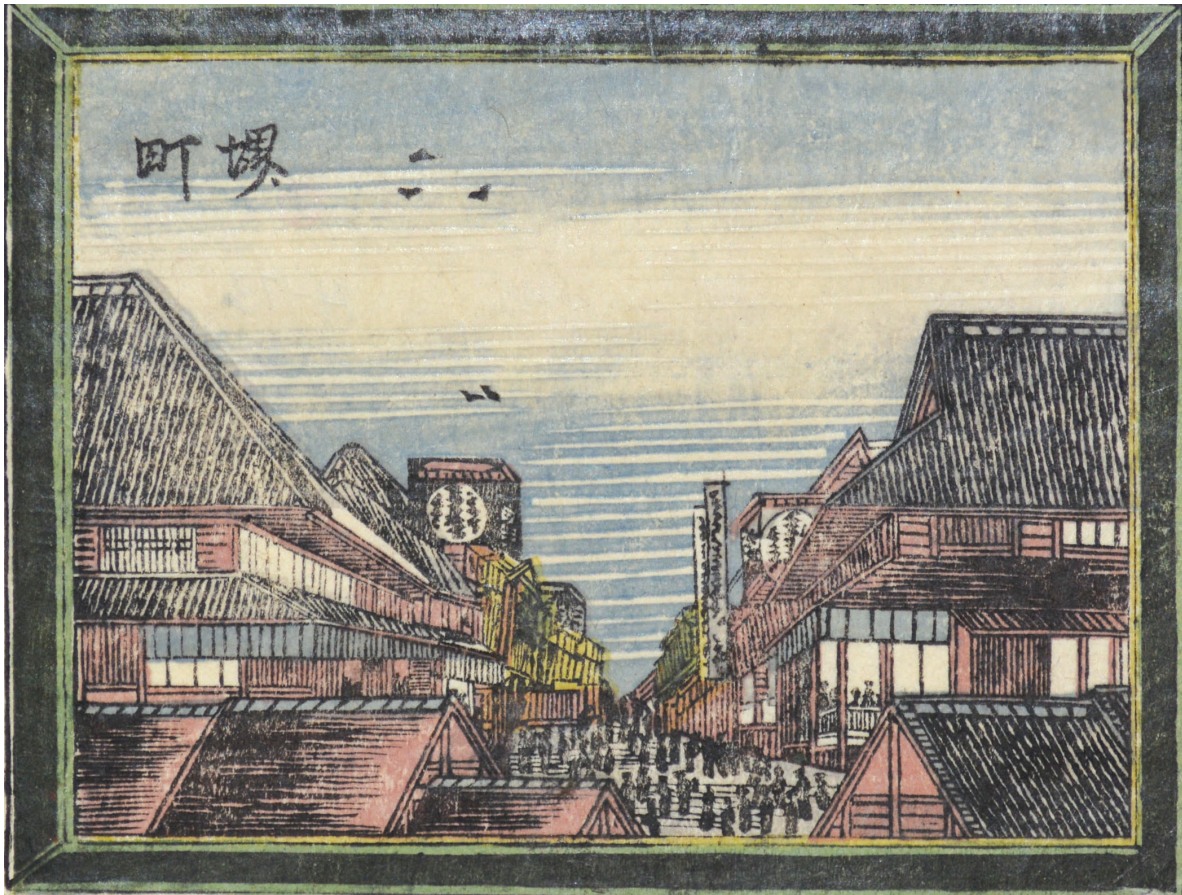
Series: The Dutch Picture Lens: Eight Views of Edo

Date: c. 1802

Publisher: Soshuya

Size: 3.25" x 4.5"

Ref. #: JP1-26703



### Sakaimachi

Series: The Dutch Picture Lens: Eight Views of Edo

Date: c. 1802

Publisher: Soshuya

Size: 3.25" x 4.25"

Ref. #: JPr-26695





### Surugamachi

Series: The Dutch Picture Lens: Eight Views of Edo

Date: c. 1802

Publisher: Soshuya

Size: 3.5" x 4.5"

Ref. #: JPr-26724



### Autumn Moon at Ishiyama

Series: Eight Views of Omi

Date: c. 1810

Publisher: Iseya Rihei

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 9.25" x 6.75"

Ref. #: JPr-26655





### Returning Boats at Yabase

Series: Eight Views of Omi

Date: c. 1810

Publisher: Iseya Rihei

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 9" x 6.75"

Ref. #: JPI-26642



### Evening Rain at Karasaki

Series: Eight Views of Omi

Date: c. 1810

Publisher: Iseya Rihei

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 9" x 6.75"

Ref. #: JPr-26638





### Clearing Storm at Awazu

Series: Eight Views of Omi

Date: c. 1810

Publisher: Iseya Rihei

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 9" x 6.75"

Ref. #: JPt-26645



### Evening Bell at Mii Temple

Series: Eight Views of Omi

Date: c. 1810

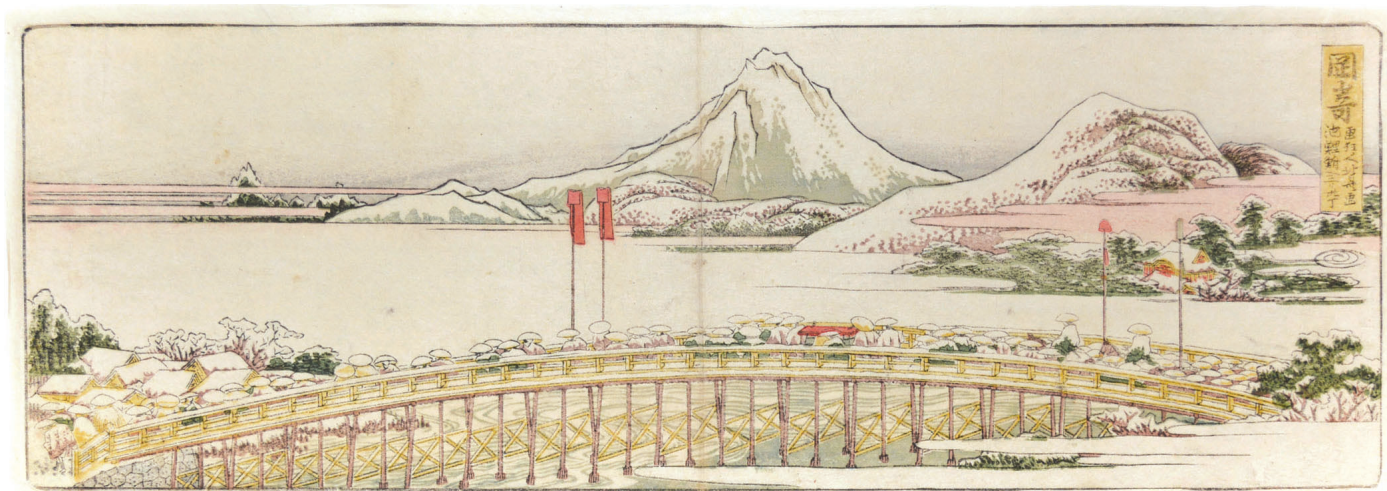
Publisher: Iseya Rihei

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 9" x 6.75"

Ref. #: JPr-26650





## Okazaki

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyojin Hokusai ga

Size: 5" x 14"

Ref. #: JPR1-26704



## Yoshiwara

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyōjin Hokusai ga

Size: 5" x 7"

Ref. #: JPr-37278





## Fujikawa

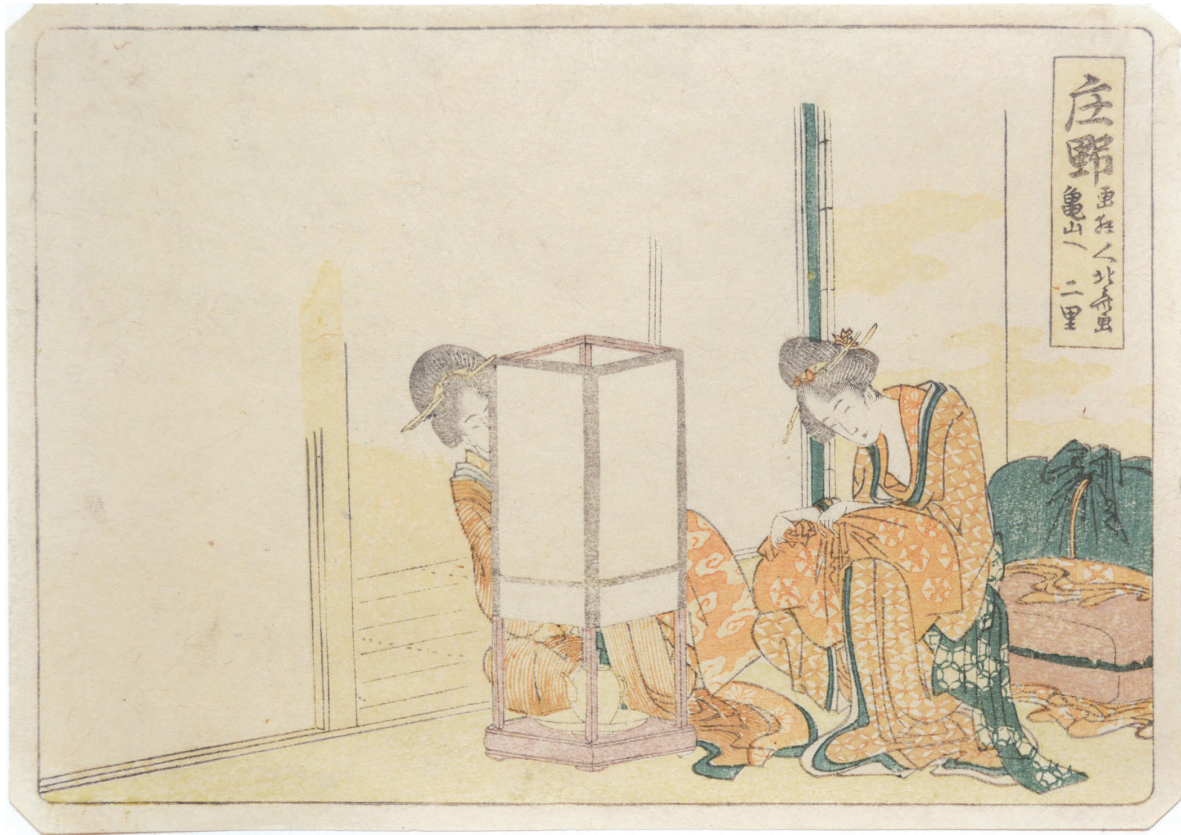
Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyojin Hokusai ga

Size: 4.75" x 6.5"

Ref. #: JPR1-37126



### Shono

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyojin Hokusai ga

Size: 4.75" x 7"

Ref. #: JPr-37275





### Okitsu

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyojin Hokusai ga

Size: 5.25" x 7"

Ref. #: JPR5464



## Fukuroi

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyōjin Hokusai ga

Size: 5" x 7"

Ref. #: JP1-37276





### Mitsuke

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyōjin Hokusai ga

Size: 5" x 7"

Ref. #: JPr-37277



### Kakekawa

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: 1804

Signature: Gakyojin Hokusai ga

Size: 4.25" x 6.5"

Ref. #: JP1-26723





## Miya

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: c. 1810

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 4.5" x 6.5"

Ref. #: JP1-26717



**Numazu: Travelers Looking at Sengan Waterway**

Series: 53 Stations of the Tokaido

Date: c. 1810

Signature: Hokusai ga

Size: 4.25" x 4.25"

Ref. #: JP1-37263





### Young Couple

From a shunga ehon

Date: c. 1815

Size: 8.5" x 10.25"

Ref. #: JPR1-26705



### Good Showing

From a shunga ehon

Date: c. 1815

Size: 8.25" x 6"

Ref. #: JPR1-26706





### Becoming a Young Woman

From a shunga ehon

Date: c. 1815

Size: 8" x 5.5"

Ref. #: JPR1-26707



### Viewing Mt. Fuji with Telescope

From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 11.75"

Ref. #: JP6184





### Cold Day at Kudanzaka Hill

From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 7.75" x 11.75"

Ref. #: JP1221



### Sudden Shower at Okido, Tamagawa

From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 11.75"

Ref. #: JPr-26722





### Cooling Off at the Mt. Atago Tea House

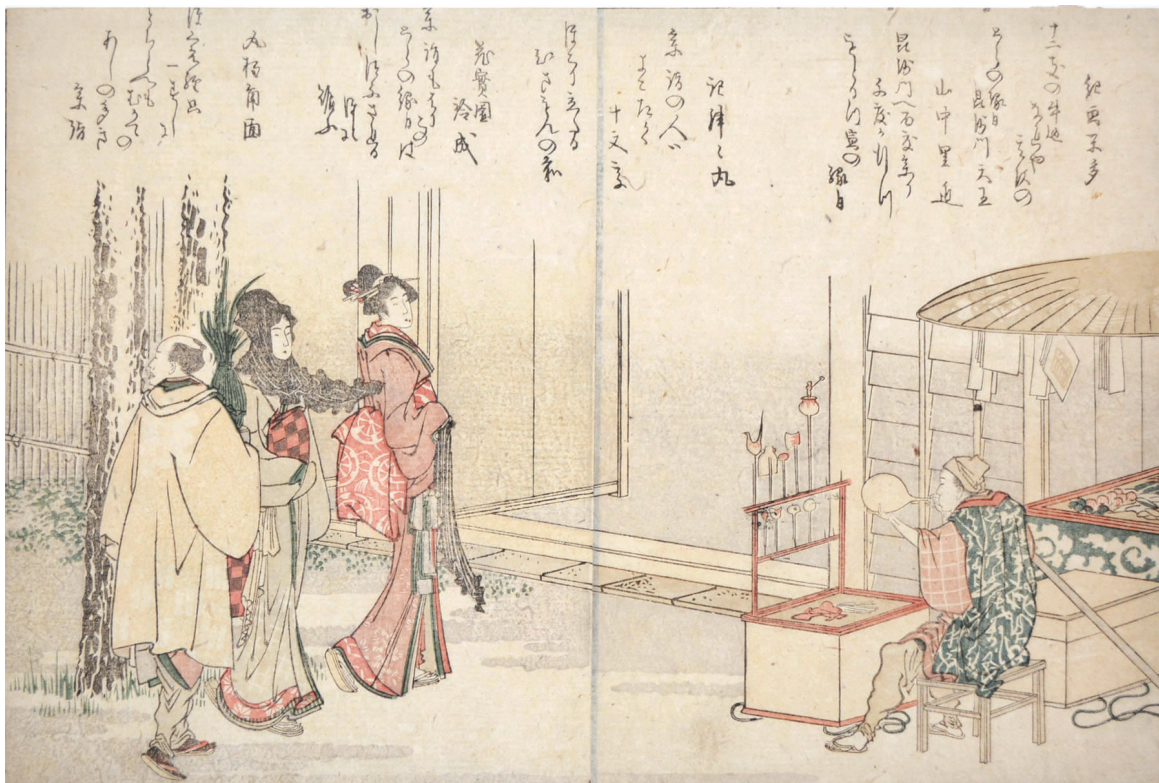
From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 10.5"

Ref. #: JP6179



### Street Vender at the Shrine

From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 11.75"

Ref. #: JP6182





### The Well of Ebiya

From the kyōka ehon (book of comic poems) *Mountains upon Mountains*

Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 11.75"

Ref. #: JP6176



## Sumida River

From the ehon *Fine Views of the Eastern Capital*

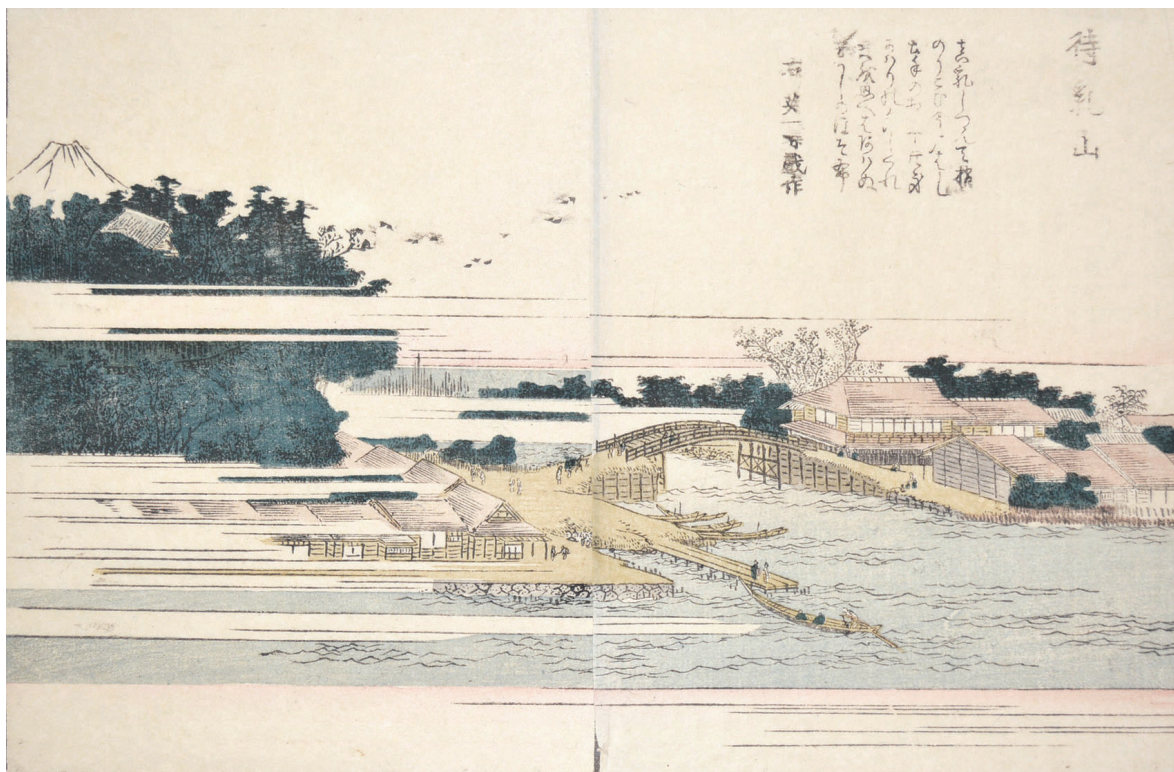
Date: 1804

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo, Suwaraya Mohei and Suwaraya Ihachi

Size: 9" x 12"

Ref. #: JP6178





## Matsuchi-yama

From the ehon *Amusements of the Eastern Capital*

Date: 1802

Publisher: Tsutaya Juzaburo

Size: 8" x 12"

Ref. #: JP6185

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